

December 7, 1941: A Day of infamy and of heroism

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Editor's Note: *This is the last in a four-part, monthly series on the history of Hickam AFB.*

This Sunday marks the 62nd anniversary of Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and other military installations on Oahu. Labeled a "Day of Infamy" by President Theodore Roosevelt, that Sunday morning not only saw devastating attacks across the island — it also saw many American heroes rise to the occasion.

While the timing of the Japanese attack was a surprise, the war between the United States and Japan was not. War raged in Europe during the months leading up to December 1941, even as Japan continued to expand into Southeast Asia.

Basing the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor and ordering an embargo against shipping raw materials to Japan, President Roosevelt warned Japan against further Asian conquests. War with Japan seemed inevitable to many, though an attack on remote Oahu was thought to be too difficult for Japan.

Dec. 7, 1941, proved that assumption wrong.

Wheeler Field, location of the Hawaiian Air Force Fighter Command, was an early target. Dozens of P-36s and P-40s were neatly parked wingtip-to-wingtip as security against possible sabotage.

Japanese bombers and fighters caught the aircraft on the ground, unarmed and unprepared for take-off. Facing no resistance, Japanese fighters came in fast and low, only 50 to 75 feet off the ground. "You could almost hit them with a rock," said Wheeler base commander, Col. William Flood. Wheeler Field lost more than half of its aircraft in the attack.

The first American airmen to literally rise to the occasion were 2nd Lts. Kenneth Taylor and George

Welch, young P-40 fliers just out of pilot training. Following an all-night party at Wheeler, the two were standing outside when the Japanese attacked. Seeing the fleet of planes in flames, Welch ran to call Haleiwa Field on the North Shore, where their own P-40s were parked. "Get two P-40s ready!" he yelled into the phone. "It's not a gag — the Japs are here!"

During the 9-minute drive to Haleiwa, Japanese Zeros strafed the young Lieutenants three times. Jumping into their armed and ready aircraft, lieutenants Welch and Taylor took off, each downing an enemy bomber during their first engagement. By the end of the day, Lieutenant Taylor had scored three kills, and Lieutenant Welch had scored four.

Shortly after the attack on Wheeler began, other Japanese dive bombers and fighters struck Hickam Field simultaneously with the attack on Pearl Harbor. Hickam Field was home to the Hawaiian bomber command, where B-17 and B-18 bombers were also parked wingtip to wingtip. Japanese dive bombers and fighters attacked Hickam's hangar area and flight line first, devastating America's bomber fleet.

By coincidence, a flight of new B-17Ds were due to arrive at Hickam that morning. The arrival of the bombers was not an everyday occurrence — the first trans-Pacific flight of bombers (from Hamilton Field, Calif. to Hickam) had just been accomplished earlier that year.

Capt. Gordon Blake, Hickam's base operations officer, had been in his office since 7 a.m. preparing for



Courtesy photo

Formation of P-40s over Oahu in August 1940.

the B-17 arrival. As the Japanese dive bombers began their attack at Hickam, Captain Blake's first thought was to get up to the control tower to get the incoming B-17s down safely. Captain Blake recalled, "We put some of them down at Bellows, and one of them on Kahuku Golf Course. I don't remember where all of them landed, but we only lost one." For his part in saving the B-17 crew and aircraft, Capt.ain (later Lt. Gen.) Blake was awarded a Silver Star.

Captain Blake and Lieutenants Taylor and Welch were but a few of the heroes of that day. Thousands lost their lives or were wounded. While Dec. 7 was without doubt a day of disaster for American military forces, the heroism of that day foreshadowed America's military actions in the years to come — now that America was at war.